



## The Elbert Files: Forgotten story of airport builder

BY [DAVE ELBERT](#), Columnist

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Des Moines International Airport is one of those institutions that people take for granted.

Few realize that the \$300 million property on Fleur Drive, which served more than 2 million passengers last year, was actually the third site for the city's airport, or that the man who built and managed it for decades had to beg, borrow and occasionally steal equipment at the outset.

I know this because I've been looking into early initiatives of the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce as part of a yearlong effort to mark the chamber's 125th anniversary.

One of those initiatives mentioned in the 1888 founding documents was transportation. Early efforts focused on railroad and, later, highway issues.

By 1921, the chamber was also lobbying for airmail service to Des Moines. It was achieved four years later when the first airport opened in 1925, on the southeast side near an Iowa Power & Light Co. plant on Vandalia Road.

But the low-lying field was soon ruled unsuitable because of fog and flooding, and a second airport was constructed two years later near Altoona.

To give some perspective, efforts to establish a Des Moines airport began six years before Charles Lindbergh made the first solo flight across the Atlantic.

In fact, in August 1927, just three months after his famous flight, Lindbergh flew here to help dedicate the new airport that was located on a 16-acre tract leased from Altoona farmer James Hanna.

The man who prepared the Altoona field was Arthur Thomas, a draftsman in the city's engineering department who had served as a Navy flight instructor during World War I.

Years later, in 1940, Thomas told the Des Moines Tribune: "All of the time I was out there at Altoona, I felt sure that wasn't going to be the Des Moines airport." It wasn't a particularly good location and was too far from the city, he said.

While he waited, Thomas said, "I wrote letters to every airport in the world that I could think of. I would just slip a dollar bill in the envelope and ask them to send me all the literature they had." He got responses from France, Germany and England. Much of the material had to be translated before he could read it.

Meanwhile, the chamber of commerce was busy lobbying the Iowa General Assembly to give cities the bonding authority needed to raise money to build real airports.

The approval came in 1929, and on Nov. 17, 1931, Des Moines Mayor Parker Crouch persuaded the City Council to issue bonds for up to \$200,000 and to buy a 160-acre farm at Southwest 21st Street (now called Fleur Drive) and Army Post Road for \$80,000, or \$500 an acre.

But it was the early years of the Great Depression, and, despite the bond issue, there wasn't much money to actually build an airport. So Thomas got creative.

The single hangar at the Altoona airport was torn down and reassembled at the new location. Nuts, bolts and other items were collected by family and friends and used to keep grading equipment and other machinery running.

"Any time I was around the city hall and saw anything I needed, if nobody was looking, and I could carry it, I had it," Thomas told the Tribune.

One night, Thomas and the park commissioner backed up a truck and "relieved the streets department of some pipe it had left lying around," the Tribune article reported.



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By 1940, when the article appeared, the Des Moines airport was rated one of the four best in the nation. More than 70 years later, it continues to rank in the top tier of regional airports.

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